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Kimanen, Anuleena

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## **Journal of Religious Education**

**Anuleena Kimanen**

### **Complicated Confessionality – How the Concept of ‘Confessional’ Could Serve the Debate on Religious Education Better**

Keywords: religious education; confessional; nature of religious education;

#### **Introduction**

In the study of religious education (RE) there is one concept that is associated with many focal issues such as the transmission of identity and culture, and freedom of religion. The concept is ‘confessional religious education’. Different societies have different schooling systems and different approaches to RE in accordance with their history, social and religious structure, and political landscape (Skeie, 2001, p. 240). Thus ‘confessional RE’ has different connotations and contents in different countries, so there is no common agreement on its definition or how it could be distinguished in practice (Davie, 2000, p. 89).

This article attempts to provide clarification for the use of the word ‘confessional’ within debate on religious education. First, I will examine what the functions of the concept of ‘confessional’ are. After that I will focus on the side of ‘confessional religious education’ that is directly linked with the transmission of identity, culture, and freedom of religion, namely developing a commitment to a certain religion. The following questions will be addressed: How has the concept or related concepts been defined? How could it be developed further?

#### **Outline of the Task and Concepts**

In this theoretical article the question of confessionality will first be tackled by discussing certain concepts around confessional RE. Naturally, one’s context has an influence on one’s interpretation of the concept of ‘confessional’, and although the analysis aims at a broad scope, and Nordic and Western European research is referred to, the Finnish variety of religious education underlies my approach. Finnish understanding and some theorizing of confessionality will therefore be explained. I go on to present two tools to evaluate confessionality in RE on the levels of objectives and practice. The latter is inspired by Uljens’s (1997) didactic model. Hypothetical examples will illustrate the tools, but I also refer to the Finnish example.

Certain concepts are needed when discussing matters around confessional RE. By the *character* of RE I mean the qualities that appear in its methods, contents and objectives. Thus, in this article confessional character means those qualities in RE that favour commitment to a certain religious tradition. In different societies, methods, contents and objectives are defined by *regulations* of different kinds, e.g. laws and curricula, sometimes perhaps through more informal rules as well. Additionally, these regulations also dictate the rights of parents and religious communities and the *arrangements* that schools are obliged to accomplish (e.g. which classes must be arranged). Thus they define the whole *system* or *model* of RE in a certain society.

### **Why Do We Use the Term 'Confessional'?**

One way to use the concept 'confessional religious education' is to refer to RE where there are separate subjects for each denomination (e.g. Willaime, 2007, p. 60–62). This use thus refers to arrangements of RE. A common synonym for 'confessional' in this meaning is 'denominational' (e.g. Durham, 2013). 'Denomination' refers more to religious organizations and 'confession' to personal faith (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, 1987.) Systems where public schools provide different RE for different denominations or where schools provide mainly one type of RE and exempt pupils affiliated to other religions, can also be labelled separative (Alberts, 2012, p. 1) or segregative (Plesner, 2002, pp. 112–113).

Another use is to imply that religious education aims at developing a commitment to a certain religion and thus to refer to the character of RE (e.g. Thiessen, 2007, p. 44; Lloyd, 2007, p. 30; Davie, 2000, p. 89). There are, however, several ways to develop religious commitment (Davie, 2000, p.89), so the concept needs further elaboration.

Sometimes a separative model is assumed to be confessional in this latter meaning (Plesner, 2002, 112). Certainly, confessional RE requires segregation (as Plesner points out) or exemptions, and there would be no point in creating such a system if preference for a certain religion was not allowed. I would still like to propose, however, that 'denominational' be used when a reference is made to the relationship with religious communities, for instance to separative systems of RE or denominational schools. Thus 'confessional' would be reserved for describing the religiously committed character of RE, and only when this character is known. For instance, according to Vermeer (2010, pp. 105–106), many denominational schools do not socialize their pupils into a religion any more.

The confessional character of RE can be observed in different kinds of systems. There is a variety of ways the surrounding society may restrict the conditions of RE and religious communities may play different

roles (e.g. Schreiner, 2002; Durham, 2013, p. 9). These restrictions have led to categorizations on the level of arrangements (Skeie, 2001, pp. 242–243; Plesner 2002, pp. 113–114). However, although arrangements shape the character of RE there are other factors as well. For instance, the Finnish system is usually labelled confessional in international comparisons although the official objectives do not entail enhancing religious commitment (Kallioniemi, 2007, p. 61). However, Finnish RE is not totally without confessional features, as will be shown below. Hence a tool is needed to depict the subtle shades of the confessional character of RE.

In countries where denominational schools play a part in the school system there is debate about what methods or aims are legitimate in their form of RE. This discussion is usually about the transmission of religious norms and values, whether this transmission is appropriate as such, or whether the religious values transmitted are compatible with modern society. (See e.g. Berglund, 2009, pp. 23–26; Vermeer, 2010; Thiessen, 2007.) This is the second function of the concept of ‘confessional RE’. A similar debate is also found in countries with denominational RE where emphasis is placed on the role of secular society (Durham, 2013, pp. 8–9).

In what follows the focus will be on comparing systems and discussing legitimacy, although strictly defining the borders of legitimate practices within RE is beyond the scope of this article. Critical discussion will be raised, but my main emphasis is on providing tools and perspectives when discussing confessionality and RE.

### **Other Expressions and Neighbouring Concepts**

There are two conceptual solutions that help describe the character of RE in a given system and aid discussion about its legitimacy. The most popular one in its different forms is attributed to Hull and Grimmitt. A distinction is made between ‘learning religion’, which means transmitting the values and culture of a certain religious tradition, and ‘learning about religion’, which refers to an objectively informative approach, and ‘learning from religion’, which could be characterized as a life question approach (Hull, 2001, pp. 5–8). This is clearly a fruitful division. Nonetheless, it is not appropriate to label any system with a single word. Confessional RE means that a ‘learning religion’ approach exists, or actually dominates within it. However, in order to attain ‘learning religion’ the two other approaches can also be used (see also Schreiner, 2002, pp. 86–87).

Thiessen (2007) proposes the concept of ‘teaching from and for commitment’, which is also used in the shorter form of ‘teaching for commitment’. What it implies is that if teaching is to engage pupils it presupposes strong commitment, insight and credibility from the teacher. To a Finnish reader, Thiessen’s

formulation is interesting because it could be elaborated to capture an aspect of the Finnish model that is often disregarded in international comparisons. In Finland, the term needed could be 'teaching from commitment', without 'for commitment', meaning that the teacher has the ability to explain the culture and beliefs of a certain tradition but does not try to engage the pupils more deeply in that tradition.

Sometimes confessional religious education is regarded as synonymous with religious nurture (e.g. Thiessen, 2007, p. 36, 44). The division between religious nurture and religious education is connected to the debate on what is legitimate when teaching religious issues in a certain context. Sometimes nurture is a term that is used to legitimize confessional religious education in denominational contexts. With parental consent it may be carried out at school with the support of the community, both in denominational schools and public, separative systems (Durham, 2013, p. 8). However, although nurture may be one function of confessional RE in some contexts, it is not always the primary one.

### **Defining the Legitimate within RE**

There are some concepts that are used to question the confessional character of RE. They are also used to advise RE teachers on their role within the denominational context. These concepts are presented in the following and their usefulness in defining what features of confessional RE are legitimate is discussed.

One way to challenge confessional RE is to refer to children's freedom of religion. Religious coercion is prohibited by human rights conventions, and schools are no exception. However, children's freedom of religion is in tension with the parents' right to bring up their children according to their convictions. Parents can do this by choosing a particular school or by applying for exemption from RE for their children. In this sense school children are protected from being coerced by the state into a worldview that does not match that of their parents. (Evans 2008, pp. 453, 462–463.)

Vermeer (2010) reflects on the concept of socialization. Modern socialization theories have abandoned the view of socialization as the transmission of community values and norms. Instead, both communal and individual identity should be developed in the socialization process. In Vermeer's view, this implies that RE in denominational contexts can be socializing but it should entail critical reflexivity and openness to other faiths. Vermeer's reflection indicates that socialization rightly belongs to confessional RE, but whether or not the community values are taken for granted demarcates its legitimacy.

The most powerful criticism of confessional RE would be to label it indoctrination or conversion. For some discussants indoctrination takes place within confessional RE because some beliefs are taught to pupils as

truths (Wood, 1990). The problem with the concept is that indoctrinative education cannot be identified by referring to one or two criteria, for it is a very complicated issue. However, education that does not make any effort to develop pupils' critical thinking can be labelled indoctrination. (Wood, 1990; Puolimatka, 1996.) Thus, calling confessional RE that encourages criticism 'indoctrinatory' is not justified.

Conversion refers to actions that aim at converting a person to a set of beliefs, but it may also bring about an intensification of those beliefs rather than changing them. A famous model of conversion is Lewis R. Rambo's (1993) holistic model that entails cultural, social, personal as well as religious dimensions. According to Rambo, conversion is a complex phenomenon affected by, for instance, social relations, societal context and the life history of the convert. Consequently, it depends on the situation which actions within RE lead to the conversion of an individual and which actions should be refrained from if conversion is to be avoided. Although confessional RE may be a favourable space for conversion, factors exist that are beyond the control of the school.

Some scholars believe that religious education can be confessional without containing undesirable aspects. They typically do not explicitly define the word confessional, probably because, for them, confessionality is a natural and necessary part of RE. Their main point is that if RE is limited to transmitting information for fear of indoctrination, religion will be reduced to mere culture. Many features are more central to faith, like (essentially non-relativist) truth claims (Watson, 2012, p. 16; Wright, 2004, pp. 188–192; Khir, 2000, 87–89, pp. 101–103), emotions, shaping one's worldview, and an ability to participate in culturally constructed practices (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001, p. 27–29, see also Lloyd, 2007). The religious needs of the child might be left unattended as well (Thiessen, 2007, p. 42). Scholars who support confessionality also maintain that if religious education does not entail encouragement towards a religious worldview or way of life it is not religion that is being taught but irreligiousness (e.g. Watson, 2012, p. 17).

The supporters of confessionality are usually aware of the accusations of indoctrination. They maintain that indoctrination is avoided by respecting the child's freedom of religion and by encouraging the child to think for him/herself. Additionally, education on other religions than one's own must be included as well as critique of one's own religion. (Watson, 2012, p. 16; Thiessen, 2002, p. 44.)

In conclusion, it can be noted that there is a line between the negative and positive connotations of confessional RE, namely the dimension community–individual. Those who identify confessionality with indoctrination emphasize the individual's right to choose his/her beliefs. Those who defend it regard the impact of the community on the individual's worldview as fundamental. These two positions are in tension

but not in direct conflict as there seems to be some common baseline, such as the requirement of openness and critical thinking.

### RE and Definitions of 'Confessional' in Finland

In Finland the Lutheran church had a strong influence on RE for decades after the responsibility for arranging education shifted from the church to lay authorities in the mid-nineteenth century. At the same time, as Finland was part of the Russian (Orthodox) Empire, strict regulations protected the Orthodox minority from assimilation. Thus Orthodox RE had to be arranged for them. Gradually, as the freedom of religion in Finland expanded, the right to RE in one's own religion was extended to other religious minorities, and a non-religious school subject was introduced for pupils with no religious affiliation. The required number of pupils decreased from 20 in one school in the 1920s to three within the same municipality in the 1990s. Other requirements are that the pupils are members of a registered religious community and that the parents should ask for religious education in their own religion. For a long time, the other religious communities were very small and organized religious education for their members outside the school. (Sakaranaho, 2013.)

In 2013 the majority of Finns were Lutheran (75%). An even bigger proportion of pupils (90.7%) attend Lutheran RE (2014). Some 5% of the pupils opt for the secular option *elämäkatsomustieto* (ethics<sup>1</sup>). Minority religions such as Islam (1.8%), Orthodox (1.5%) and Catholic comprise small exceptions, especially outside the biggest cities (Statistics Finland, 2014, 2015).

There are only a few religiously-based private schools. Religious communities co-operate with school authorities but the authorities themselves bear the responsibility for practical arrangements and prepare the syllabi for RE. The national core curriculum includes teaching issues such as other religions and worldviews, freedom of religion, and ethics in every religious education subject. The religious tradition of one's own community is explained in detail but pupils are not expected to adopt these beliefs. (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2012, p. 178–181; Board of Education 2006b.)

The word confession has appeared in Finnish school laws since 1923 (Pyysiäinen, 1998, p. 44). The Basic Education Act was altered in the early 2000s as a result of the reform of the Act on Freedom of Religion. Before, the law declared that pupils were to receive religious education "according to their own confession". This phrase was changed to the form "according to their own religion". This change was not

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<sup>1</sup> The standard translation of *elämäkatsomustieto* is 'ethics', which in the Finnish school context means different philosophies, cultures, and worldviews.

meant to result in a change in the contents of education but only indicate the continuation of the separative model. More importantly, however, the new Act on Freedom of Religion did not require that the teacher was a member of the religious community on which he/she taught. (Sakaranaho, 2013, p. 234.)

The nominal change in the law caused confusion, although the previous law did not include the term 'confessional'. Guiding the pupil into a certain faith in the Lutheran RE curriculum had already in the 1970s been replaced by the idea that one first has to know one's own religion and then other religions (Pyysiäinen, 1982, p. 35–36). However, there was wide public debate, and some important changes took place in the early 2000s. School worship was given new instructions (Board of Education, 2006a, p. 6), and new national curricula (not only for RE) were implemented (Board of Education, 2004; Board of Education, 2006b). The informative character of religious education was emphasized and worship was more clearly separated from religious education than before.

As in Finland confessionality has been a controversial key concept in debates on RE, attempts have been made to develop it, and for this article Pyysiäinen's work has been influential. For Pyysiäinen, confessionality meant dependency on the religious community. He approached the confessionality of a certain RE subject from three perspectives. The pupil perspective contains the objectives of RE, the teacher perspective the teacher's role in relation to the school and the religious community, and the contents perspective the balance between one's own and other religions. (Pyysiäinen, 1982, pp. 77–78.)

Is, then, today's Finnish RE confessional or not? How can we evaluate the regulations and the practice thoroughly and in a balanced manner? Pyysiäinen, for one, provides an opportunity to evaluate confessionality by applying multiple dimensions. However, something is still missing, namely the fact that religious rituals can be included in teaching methods in different forms. This is remarkable because religious rituals have become a prevailing criterion for confessionality in Finland (Sakaranaho, 2006, p. 9, cf. also Zilliacus, 2013, p. 516). Religious practice alone is not a sufficient definition of confessionality since there are many other ways to engage pupils and increase their commitment. It is time, in fact, to combine different aspects of confessionality.

### **A Tool for Describing and Comparing: Dimensions of Confessionality**

For the first function of the concept 'confessionality', describing and comparing the character of RE in different contexts, stipulated by the laws and the curricula, I suggest the use of four dimensions. In the following I present these dimensions by describing their extremities, the imagined 'pure' types of



confessional and non-confessional RE, and in practice a certain form of RE may fall anywhere between these two extremes.

### *Dimension of contents*

First, the knowledge contents of the curricula should be examined. A fully confessional religious education on this dimension would only present one religion, its doctrines, rites and important texts. Criticism and diversity could be dealt with by standard answers. The non-confessional counterpart would seek to maintain balance, allocating time and effort to every religious tradition. This extremity would need a great deal of unbiased teaching material written by experts and some rules concerning on what basis the time is allocated (e.g. local vs. global proportions of members of a certain religion). Questions which need attention are which and how many perspectives on religious traditions are provided and how is criticism balanced.

### *Dimension of rituals*

Second, which skills the pupils are supposed to gain and what teaching methods are allowed in the classroom should be studied. It is not only knowledge that is transmitted within education, but also understanding and the ability to use the knowledge. Engaging pupils with activities is encouraged from a pedagogical perspective. (e.g. Schreiner, 2002, p. 89.)

The dimension of rituals deals with the role of religious practice in RE. Teachers may use hymns, prayers, or acting rituals to familiarize the pupils with their own religion, and this can be perceived as socialization. But if this is done to teach pupils about another religion, should this also be considered socialization? If the experience is strong or pleasant enough, does it affect the pupil's religious identity? Is it not just this effect that is considered problematic at least in those schools that are supposed to be neutral? (See also Davie, 2000, p. 96.)

Thus the confessional extremity of RE on the dimension of rituals would be a kind of divine service specially designed for children. Pupils would learn by joining in with songs and prayers, or engaging in holy narratives. The non-confessional extremity, on the other hand, would use only sparingly techniques that aim at arousing specific emotions.

### *Dimension of objectives*

Third, the desired outcomes of RE should be identified. This dimension is about commitment to a religion. Confessional religious education on this dimension would thus aim at guiding the pupils to internalize the values, norms and beliefs of a religion. Its non-confessional counterpart would aim principally at transmitting knowledge about, and understanding of, religions. The development of a personal worldview could be included in an open and unbiased way.

#### *Dimension of identity assumption*

The fourth dimension examines what role the community is seen to have in the religious development of an individual. When the child comes to school, does he or she have a religion or will the child choose it freely when sufficiently informed? What does it mean to 'have a religion' in a classroom context? Is it a conscious personal faith or an unarticulated or mixed cultural background of rituals, narratives and shared meanings? These issues are probably not written down explicitly in any official documents. Instead, they may be the underlying assumptions in curricula and textbooks.

On this dimension, confessional RE would be designed to foster the communal identity of the child, help him/her make an informed choice, and prepare the pupil to answer questions from outsiders. The idea is that the child has to be able to interpret symbols and debates in his/her own religious community even if he/she decides not to adopt the faith. Identity assumption may also be observed in the teaching material if pupils are assumed to have some own experience of rituals and practices. In non-confessional RE the child would be treated as an individual who has to answer the ultimate questions of human existence independently. No attention to the religious backgrounds would be paid unless pupils themselves choose to bring them up.

#### *Conclusion*

Using these four dimensions a certain system of RE could be portrayed by estimating its location between the extremities. A description is not appropriate until all the dimensions have been used. If RE is taught in accordance with the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (ODIHR, 2007) it cannot be confessional on the dimension of contents because balanced instruction about other religions and worldviews is required. It may, however, be confessional on all the other dimensions. Another example: RE in Finland is officially almost non-confessional on the dimension of objectives, but it has traits of confessionalism in all other dimensions. Although other religions and religiousness are addressed, the focus is on one's own religion. Religious practice does not belong to RE but it may be taught. On the dimension of identity assumption, Finnish RE is

almost fully confessional because membership of a community defines what RE subject the family is allowed to opt for.

Non-confessional RE is here defined by the absence of confessional traits. The issues of true objectivity and acceptable engagement suggest that the distinction confessional–non-confessional does not necessarily solve the question of defining the legitimate RE within non-denominational contexts. Adding a multi-confessional option might help in tackling these questions, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

### **A Tool for Evaluating Confessionality in the Classroom**

Above a tool was provided to evaluate systems of RE defined by regulations at various levels. The regulations remain ideals if only a few teachers are able or willing to fulfil them. However, if the baseline is to be implemented or the character of religious education in a given school evaluated, the teaching/learning process has to be taken into consideration as a whole. Some discussion is also needed on liabilities.

I shall apply here Uljens's (1997, pp. 64–67) didactic model of teaching or learning, which focuses on the interaction between the teacher and the pupil. This interaction is affected by the formal intentions of the collective level, the teacher's planning that takes both the collective regulations and the school context into account, but also by the pupil's preunderstandings that he or she brings to the situation. After the lesson, according to Uljens, evaluation takes place both informally and formally.

This can be adapted to religious education and evaluating its confessional character. First, society documents its aims for religious education in its laws, decrees and curricula. Teachers then interpret them through the pedagogical education they have received and their personal aims. Writers of textbooks and other materials interpret the intentions of society as well, but teachers choose the material as well as the methods they take into the classroom.

The intentions of the society and the contents of the textbooks may be analysed with the help of the dimensions presented above. Furthermore, the extent to which the teacher or textbook authors have interpreted the societal intentions correctly can be examined. However, it is not always obvious what the correct interpretation should be. Fancourt (2015) has compared educational policy documents to a palimpsest, where traces of old policies remain under new wordings. This leaves freedom for individual interpretation (cf. Davie, 2000, p. 96). In studies among Finnish RE teachers there are hints that their views on how to implement religious freedom vary (Kallioniemi, 1997, pp. 183–195; Zilliacus, 2013; Rissanen,

2014, p. 128). Additionally, choosing good quality teaching material is not fully the responsibility of the teacher if only poor material is available. The teacher can use the material and point out weaknesses to the pupils, but probably the wordings and images of the material still have an impact on the pupils.

The intentions and interpretations of teachers could in theory be detected in the choice of methods and material or in the language they use in classroom conversation. But in classroom interaction there are many aspects that are not totally within the control of the teacher. He or she has to shape the methods according to the facilities at the school and to the learning skills of the pupils. Teachers' wordings are also affected by the pupils' responses.

Let us assume that an adult observer has a clear-cut, unbiased notion of the societal intentions of RE. He or she evaluates the teachers' intentions in the classroom and finds them to be adequate. But what about the pupils? If religious education is to respect the religious freedom of pupils, it is problematic if they still feel that they are expected to express religiosity. In fact, there is not much research on pupils' perspectives and how they interpret the aims of religious education. Probably their previous experiences and presuppositions about religious education affect their interpretations.

When teachers and pupils in minority religions in Finland were interviewed it turned out that the teachers generally emphasized the freedom of choice of pupils and families concerning religious matters, but many of them expected that the religious background of pupils would unite them. A strong identity was valued, which was reflected in the fact that pupils with weak affiliation felt uneasy in the classes. (Zilliacus, 2013, p. 516, 518; Zilliacus & Holm, 2013, p. 9.) In Britain it has been noted that merely strongly expressed religious views by the teacher may make pupils feel that they are also expected to adopt these views (Fancourt, 2007, pp. 62–64).

Additionally, the whole pupil group has to be taken into account. The views stated and the way in which they are expressed in the class probably have an affect on the views of other pupils. Is, then, the teacher responsible for the atmosphere in the religious education class? There is much under the surface that the teacher is not even aware of. Nonetheless, the teacher usually has more power than any single pupil in the classroom. Teachers choose the topics, they encourage or interrupt, and usually talk quite a lot themselves (Walsh, 2006, p. 5). For instance, in Britain some pupils with a strong religious affiliation had two kinds of unsettling experiences in RE classes. First, teachers depicted their religion through stereotypes or religious norms. Second, teachers asked them to represent their religion, which made them subject to other pupils' questioning and sometimes hostility. (Moulin, 2011.)

Evaluation focuses on outcomes. Theoretically, an increase in the religiosity of the pupils may be regarded as the outcome of RE of a confessional character. This cannot be measured accurately in any reliable way. As seen in the previous section, religious conversion – also understood as the intensification of a religious affiliation – is a complex process. It is inevitable that religious education affects the worldviews of some pupils by providing information and experiences. Adhering to a religious community may be facilitated by the familiar vocabulary and sometimes by personal relationships. However, other factors in the social and psychological background of pupils are also at work. (Kimanen, 2014.) It is also difficult to distinguish the causal connection of each factor.

It can be seen here that the evaluation of the 'degree' of confessionality, for example in a denominational school or within the work of a certain teacher, cannot be straightforward. It is important that the evaluator is sensitive to factors that can affect his or her own interpretation of the regulations. Special attention must also be paid to factors that are not fully within the control of the teacher or the school, e. g. the availability of good quality teaching material or the special needs of pupils. On both the level of systems and on the level of practice the confessional character may be weaker in some areas than in others.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of 'confessional' is needed in various connections. It is used for comparing systems, and for describing RE to parents, policy-makers, and to future teachers. It can be replaced in many situations but the term 'confessional' has the advantage of familiarity, practicality and coverage. Its width is also a disadvantage because it blurs the meaning of the concept. I have suggested specification in regard to contents, methods, aims, or the identity assumption. More attention should also be paid to the complexity of the teaching/learning process, and this involves reflection on the teacher's control over the diverse elements of confessionality.

Some issues deserve more reflection and negotiation within the RE community. If teachers or schools are evaluated, more specific guidelines considering methods and interaction are needed. Those guidelines, however, should not be established without exploring the differences between the educational values of religious and non-religious traditions and negotiating a common ground. There should be space for developing both communal and individual identity, and issues of balance, perspective and engagement should also be addressed. In this process, probably, the distinction confessional – non-confessional is not enough and new concepts will be needed.

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